

Grace Notes

Layering Small Grace Upon Small Grace

TERRY C. MUCK

God's truth comes to us from different places at different times. Each truth event sounds a small note of grace that together, if we listen, make up the musical score of God active in the world today. Listen to these ten small notes of grace from ten recent books.

Adam Sharr

Heidegger's Hut

Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006

Jung had his round stone house and Thoreau his cabin on Walden Pond. Heidegger had a hut. If Jung's stone house reflected (and excised?) his psychological demons, and Thoreau's cabin served as an ideological icon, Heidegger's hut created the physical conditions under which he thought (and wrote) best. Heidegger had *die Hutte* built in summer 1922. He retreated there often over the next five decades, using the 3-room, 6 by 7 meter wood structure as a writing place where his most famous philosophical texts came into being.

Die Hutte gave Heidegger three things: (1) A centering datum, the one real thing that existed above all others—his retreat house in the Black Forest mountains of Bavaria. It was an anchor in life's flux. (2) A set of ready made categories, metaphors, and analogues that best expressed his philosophical thought. He discovered these categories in the changes of the seasons, the unpredictable, sometimes violent weather, the enduring cycle of night and day, the life-giving water from his constantly flowing spring; (3) Hope. He saw his hut as somehow unsullied by city life, a life that is less authentic because of its artificial overlay of roles and expectations and technological tropes. The hut, shorn of most of these things, offered him the potential freedom, the relative human freedom that is the only seedbed for creative thought.

To be sure, each of these three "blessings" came to be abused. His localism (provincialism) was used by the Nazis (at first aided by Heidegger himself) as a rationale for German ethnocentrism. His love of nature displayed some of

the more questionable side effects of German romanticism. And his quest for human freedom too often moved his thinking along the spectrum toward the Nietzschean nihilism to which the glorification of human autonomy can often lead.

But it is difficult not to be attracted to Heidegger and his hut. This book is written by an architect interested in showing the dialectical influences of philosophy on physical space and physical space on philosophy.

Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier, editors
The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology
 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007

As an important worldwide movement within the orthodox Christian tradition, evangelicalism is deserving of a volume in the “Cambridge Companion” series. Eighteen essays assess the state of important evangelical doctrines (such as God, Christ, justification, ecclesiology), crucial interfaces with current sociological issues (such as gender, world religions, and the arts), and concise regional reports on evangelicalism in Asia, Latin America, Africa, Europe, and North America.

The articles are written by a fine collection of worldwide scholars and practitioners of evangelicalism. Perhaps the most valuable part of this companion are the concise bibliographies at the end of each essay. Although the essays themselves will be quickly dated (some already are just in the lag between writing and publication), the list of ten to fifteen books on each topic have good shelf life in guiding the interested scholar to find out more.

Jack Weatherford
Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World
 New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004

Anthropologist Jack Weatherford is a revisionist and a modernist. In one of his earlier works, *Indian Givers*, he revised the common notion that it was Columbus-led Europeans who brought civilization to the poor, bedeviled indigenous peoples of North America with the insight that in many, many ways Native Americans brought civilization to the white Westerners. In *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, he does the same for the Mongols of the Central Asian steppes. Instead of blood-thirsty hordes of rapine savages we discover that Genghis Khan created the largest empire the world has ever known, and in the process initiated dynamics that have led to a unified China, a unified (at least for a period) Korea, global trade, speedy travel, and world commerce—including a paper money system. This revisionist urge serves Weatherford well in helping us discover a great world leader instead of a mindless savage.

Weatherford's modernist urge, however, does not serve as well. The revisionist's curse is that subtlety and complexity is lost in the revising. For modernists there seem to be only two ethical speeds—good and bad. We once viewed Genghis Khan as bad, but Jack Weatherford is here to tell you he was good. Sure Genghis killed hundreds of thousands of people in his conquests—but he hardly ever tortured anyone. Whereas some of his successors (notably Timerlane) publicly humiliated the leaders he captured and publicly raped their wives and daughters, Genghis Khan would never do such a thing—well, hardly ever. What emerges is as much a caricature of a good Khan as the old history's painting of a bad Khan. One suspects that the real Khan was a bit more complex than all that.

Ethne Barnes

Diseases and Human Evolution

Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005

Our first school science lessons teach us that germs cause disease. As we become a bit more sophisticated, we come to realize that not all germs cause disease, that there are “good” germs (commensals) that we live with everyday (some even help various bodily functions), and “bad” germs (pathogens) with sinister sounding names (Hanta virus, HIV/AIDS) and creepy shapes looming under electron microscopes. In our fear-crazed and entertainment-saturated societies, some pathogens even become “movie-stars” like the Ebola virus did in Dustin Hoffman's movie *Contact*, personalized serial-killers who need to be taken down by the “good-guys”—Dustin Hoffman and his faithful sidekick, Anti-Serum.

Now Ethne Barnes tells us it isn't even as simple as all that. Under certain conditions even the good guy commensals can get so stirred up that they cause disease, and pathogens aren't always on the rampage—we all have plenty of e-coli in our digestive tracts that if located anywhere else would make us sick. Perhaps, Barnes suggests, our straight-line, cause and effect, medical thinking about “germs cause disease” needs to be augmented by recovering a view of disease championed by the ancient Greek Hippocrates and most Asian cultures, that disease comes from an imbalance of the four humours—yellow bile, black bile, phlegm, blood—in the body and nature. Only instead of Hippocrates four humours, we need to substitute a balance among the four modern humours: pathogens, genetic dispositions, immune strength, and environmental conditions (including geography, culture, lifestyle, and physical factors). Germs cause disease, yes, but also dis-harmony causes dis-ease.

J. A. Scott Kelso and David A. Engstrom

The Complementary Nature

Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006

Christian theology is filled with complementary pairs—transcendence~immanence, judgment~mercy, sin~salvation—in which both are claimed to be true. Christian theology is also filled with either/or opposites—law or grace, true doctrine or false doctrine, good or evil—where a clear choice is demanded. A clear *sic or non*.

Since it clearly includes both complementary pairs and either/or opposites, Christian theology would make a good case study for the authors of *The Complementary Nature*. Scott and Engstrom argue that we shouldn't have to choose between either/or thinking or both~and thinking because both are so prevalent in our world and thought.

They advance their argument using both philosophy (the philosophy of complementary pairs) and a rising branch of empirical science called coordination dynamics. Both authors are scientists but seem to handle the philosophy side of the argument well.

Actually, the Christian theology application of *The Complementary Nature* would be revealing since the authors would probably claim that Christianity's complementary pairs should sometimes take either/or forms (i.e. in some contexts God acts transcendently not immanently) and, more problematic, that either/or opposites should sometimes take complementary form (i.e. an event is a mixture of good and evil).

Brian Daizen Victoria

Zen At War

New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006

This book raises two questions, one of which it answers. It asks whether or to what extent Buddhism, and particularly Zen Buddhism in Japan, was complicit in the Second World War effort. The answer to that question is an emphatic yes. Victoria details statements made by almost all the institutional representatives of various Buddhist sects in Japan and shows beyond any question the great lengths they went to provide moral justification and material support to the Japanese war machine, using the rationale that this war was actually an expression of Buddhist compassion: "The sword that kills is identical with the sword that gives life."

The second question is more implicit: To what extent does Buddhism in general (that is, non-Japanese Buddhism) and religion in general give support to wars within their purview? As a Christian one cannot read this and avoid squirming at more than one instance of public statements Japanese Buddhists made in defense of Japan's wars against China, Russia, Korea and their

colonizing efforts against the same. One wants desperately to believe that it is political and economic pressures that bring about these anomalies in religions that claim to promote peace and love and justice. That certainly was a contributing factor in the case of Japanese Buddhism and WWII. But at some point one does have to ask the question about the nature of belief structures and how they might be contributing factors also. How is it that the teachings of the Buddha, and Jesus, and Muhammed, and Confucius, and others, can be marshaled in support of inhumane acts of violence? Victoria does not go far in answering this question, but by raising it does us all a service.

Amartya Sen

Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny

New York: Norton, 2006

Amartya Sen won the Nobel Prize in economics but writes more these days in the areas of philosophy and politics. In this book he describes the nature of personal and corporate identity in the 21st century. He rails against those who would deny the importance of individual identity in their work, either ignoring it (economists and rational choice sociologists) or oversimplifying it by insisting people have a primary singular identity (Western or Eastern, or Christian or Muslim) and have little choice about it. He argues that this choiceless singularity of human identity will lead us to continued, accelerating conflict and violence.

Instead he insists that people have (1) a plurality of identities (Western, Christian, professor, heterosexual, English-speaking, football-loving, etc) any one element of which may at different times predominate in their thinking and behaving; and (2) have, within certain boundaries choices about what identities they adopt. Since this pluralism of identities give people room to maneuver they ways they see themselves and their relationships with others based on reasoned argument and empirical evidence, seeing people as having a plurality of identities, has a better chance of leading us to a world of peace.

This argument has many implications, of course, for the fields of politics and economics, but also is important to Christian theology and mission. Seeing people as having a plurality of identities might have some interesting ramifications for the ways we define conversion and Christian identity.

Joanne O'Brien and Martin Palmer

The Atlas of Religion

Berkeley: University of California, 2007

As religion continues to impact our world in both positive and negative ways, understanding the roots of these influences becomes increasingly

important. Religious beliefs have consequences. Religious belief is not an interesting add on to a person's life, it is the determinant of such behavior. In a world where in the public mind religious is as religious does, this book is a help.

The authors briefly discuss the history of religion and the history of the major religions and their derivatives today. In the second section they give reliable summaries of the major religious groupings (as they divide them) in the world: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Sikhism, Traditional Beliefs, Roman Catholics, New Religious Movements, and Non-Believers. In a section called "structures" they give helpful graphs and charts of how religions relate to social, political, and economic entities in the world today. They end with sections that look at conflicts, tensions, and challenges we all face. The strength of the book is its helpful graphics—the text simply illustrates the graphics rather than the other way around.

Christians today must know about the world's religions. This book is a good start.

Cyril H. T. Germon

A Wesleyan in the West: The Diary of William Traylen

Grovedale, Australia: Germon, 2006

William Traylen was a Wesleyan Methodist missionary to Western Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century. He left an abbreviated diary of his travels to Australia and his first ten years of ministry. Thereafter he was forced to retire from the ministry because of failing eyesight and opened a printing business in Perth. He later sold the printing company and began to make wooden implements. He died in 1926 at the age of 83.

His great grandson here transcribes the diary and then tells as he has heard it, the story of William Traylen. The man that emerges from the pages is a passionate servant of God seeking holiness every step of the way. In one sense he did nothing extraordinary except serve God under difficult conditions. Were it not for the love of his great grandson we would never have heard of him.

In another sense, though, the very ordinairiness and faithfulness of his life makes for an extraordinary life. It is a life that we should all be proud to have lived. His family obviously recognized this and gave us this valuable portrait.

Don Sailers

Music and Theology

Nashville: Abingdon, 2007

Short books that achieve their aims are more difficult to write than long works. This 83-page book summarizes the author's scholarly focus in forty years of teaching: The relationship of Christian theology and music. Don

Sailers states his goal this way: “[To achieve] a deeper understanding of how music can be theological, and theology can be conceived as musical. How might theological discourse require music for its realization, and why do many forms of music evoke religious awareness that calls for theological interpretation.”

Music’s theological advantage is that through tunes and words it manages to speak to the whole human person in a way that words alone cannot. Most theology is written theology. As such it does not speak to the whole human—body and mind—as music does. Not that music is the complete way of doing theology. Much of theology is expressed through action. Music cannot replace that, although Saliers devotes a chapter of his book to a discussion of how music can be used to motivate and augment theological action in peace and justice efforts, for example.

An excellent, concise expression of a topic important to all Christians, but particularly to young people for whom music often becomes a surrogate theology.